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SUBJECT: TRIBALISM AS A MOBILIZING FACTOR IN KUWAITI
POLITICS (IN THE ABSENCE OF POLITICAL PARTIES)

REF: KUWAIT 0053

Classified By: Ambassador Deborah K. Jones for reasons 1.4 b and d

Summary

11. (C) While impossible to appreciate fully within the narrow boundaries of a single Gulf state, tribalism -- a phenomenon that links many contemporary Kuwaitis to an age-old tradition of honor and mutual support in the face of external challenge -- is a central factor in Kuwait's socio-political equation. Its political salience continues to grow, as socially conservative, Islamist-leaning tribalists manipulate the state's political institutions with increasing skill and push back against Western cultural influences. As demonstrated in Kuwait's May 2008 National Assembly elections, in which candidates whose primary affiliation was tribal won half of the 50 parliamentary seats, as well as a subsequent cabinet reshuffle in which members of Kuwait's four main tribes received influential posts largely on the basis of tribal credentials, tribalism partly fills the void created by the absence of official political parties. As Kuwait teeters toward yet another parliamentary dissolution, the machinations of political figures whose first loyalty is to tribe, rather than to the state or the ruling Al Sabah family, are at the heart of the country's domestic political impasse. The Al Sabah are now victims of a process they unleashed years ago by "playing the tribal card" to outflank other political movements. They have no visible plan to cope with rising tribal assertiveness or to craft a parliamentary majority based on non-tribal affiliations. End Summary.

Kuwaiti Tribes: Then

12. (C) Establishment of a "kuwait" (Arabic: small fort) near the head of the Gulf dates at least to the early 1700s. The arrival of the previously nomadic al- Utub tribe, which includes the Al Sabah family, marked a permanent change, as Sabah political leadership became formal and hereditary from 11752. As with other towns in the Arabian peninsula, the growing population within the walls -- the "Hadhar" (Arabic: settled) -- enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with the nomadic Bedouin ("bedu" in Arabic) who migrated over vast areas to feed their livestock but returned periodically to trade with the early Kuwaitis. While the urbanites had (and have) their own traditional tribal affiliations, they saw (and see) themselves as distinct from the nomadic tribes. Interaction between the two followed a pattern common across the peninsula, as well as Iraq, Jordan and Syria, from time immemorial. The unique course of this intertwined evolution of Hadhar and bedu in Kuwait was shaped by two particularly significant events:

-- The 1920 Battle of Jahra (a small town 40 km northwest of Kuwait City), in which Kuwaiti urban dwellers, led personally by the Amir of the day, decisively repelled a major attack by KSA founder Ibn Saud's "Ikhwan" (Arabic: brotherhood), the fanatical Bedouin militia created to consolidate Saudi power on the Arabian peninsula through a fearsome "jihad." The Ikhwan generally regarded holdouts against Saudi power as "enemies of God" deserving summary execution, and forbears of today's Kuwaiti tribes constituted an important source of Ikhwan manpower. Had they prevailed at Jahra, Kuwait would have been absorbed into the growing Saudi domain; and

-- The 1922 Uqair Protocol, imposed by British High Commissioner to Baghdad, Sir Percy Cox, to quell attacks by the Ikhwan and to define the boundaries between Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Kuwait. The Protocol also contrived neutral zones -- due to residual ambiguity over which tribes had more legitimate claims to which territory -- along lines now recognized as borders. The various Bedouin tribes, whose previously well-established migratory patterns crossed and re-crossed the new boundaries, were each assigned to the country in which their main wells were located.

Who is Kuwaiti?

13. (C) With the delineation of borders, and more so after the discovery of oil in Kuwait in 1938, the ancient bedu/Hadhar pattern began to evolve along new lines. The settlement of Bedouin tribes within Kuwait's newly drawn boundaries gave them a hazy sense of affiliation to Kuwait as a national

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entity; but strong distinctions in lifestyle between the Hadhar and the newly resident bedu tribes remained. In fact, the Bedouin tribalists were initially not considered citizens at all. Kuwaitis, literally, were only those who had lived in the old walled town (the "kuwait").

14. (C) As a tactic to secure tribal allegiance and support in the National Assembly, the GOK in 1959 passed a nationality law, which expanded the process of granting citizenship -- and thus voting rights and access to Kuwaiti economic largesse -- to tribesmen. Despite "playing the tribal card" for political advantage, the law created a further distinction between the Hadhar and the tribesmen. It defined "native" Kuwaitis as those who had resided in Kuwait continuously since before 1920 (the year of the building of the third and last city wall). "Naturalized" Kuwaitis -- nomenclature tailor-made for the tribesmen -- were defined as those with legitimate claims to citizenship, but not present in Kuwait before 1920. They were denoted as Article 2 (vice Article 1) class citizens, and were prevented by law from running or voting in elections for a period of twenty years after naturalization. (Note: Many Kuwaitis in these early years found the concept of Article 2 status repugnant and refused to submit claims to nationality. Their descendants make up some portion of the estimated 100,000 "bidoons," (Arabic: "without", i.e. without citizenship) or stateless Arab residents today. End note.)

15. (C) With rising oil revenues, the ruling Al Sabah family was able to provide -- for the first time -- health care, education and other services for its primary beneficiaries, the Hadhar. As such services and benefits increasingly trickled out to the tribes beyond the old line of the city wall, the Bedouin became increasingly settled and the traditional distinction in lifestyle between the Hadhar and the now settled tribes narrowed; but a fundamental difference of mindset continued to divide the two. That distinction never disappeared, and is the essence of Kuwait's tribalism "problem" today.

16. (C) In the 1960s, Information Minister (and occasional

Electricity Minister) Shaykh Jaber al-Ali Al Sabah, while vying to become Crown Prince, initiated changes of status from Article 2 to Article 1 for a large number of Kuwaitis -- primarily from the al-Ajmi tribe (his mother's tribe) -- to secure their political support against anti-government elements in parliament. Thus began outreach efforts to tribalists by ranking members of the GOK in order to build bases of individual political support. This tactic scored short-term gains for a variety of Al Sabah actors, but did not secure lasting tribal affection or loyalty to the ruling family or the government it leads. On the contrary, alienation between the tribes, on the one hand, and the GOK and the Hadhar on the other, has continued to grow over time.

Kuwaiti Tribes: Now

17. (C) To a degree, tribes today function as de facto political parties, acting in opposition to a government they regard as weak and incompetent. This opposition stands in contrast to the generally pro-regime leanings of the old-line Hadhar families who view themselves as the traditional torch-bearers of Kuwaiti nationhood. While they continue to enjoy disproportionate wealth, influence and social standing, their overt political influence -- at least in the National Assembly -- is diluted by the absence of coordinated action. There are no published demographic studies on the populations of the individual tribes, but according to statistics released on voter concentrations during the 2008 parliamentary elections, there are four major voting groups in Kuwait today (by voter turnout) with pronounced political influence:

-- Urban Sunni, or Hadhar, concentrations, among which the Al Sabah ruling family is the most prominent. The majority of the Hadhar live in downtown Kuwait City; their numbers drop significantly in outlying areas of the capital. The number of these voters registered for the 2008 elections was 112,919.

-- The four most prominent tribes in Kuwait (by registered voters) are: al-Azmi (32,325), al-Mutairi (27,130), al-Ajmi (21,749), al-Rasheed (17,798). A large majority of these tribes live in rural areas of the country, or outside the

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wall. (Note: These are often referred to by the plural form, i.e. al-Awazem, al-Mutran, al-Awajem, and al-Rasha'id. End note.)

-- Members of the remaining 16 tribes, also "outside the wall" comprised 75,891 voters.

-- Shi'a Muslims. Though not in any real sense a tribe, the Shi'a tend to act cohesively in defense of perceived common interests, generally viewing their religious identity as their primary affiliation for political purposes. Public records identified Shi'a voters as numbering 51,436.

Role of Tribes in Electoral Primaries

18. (C) Kuwait's constitution does not allow formal political parties. The vacuum that might have been filled by parties has instead been filled to some extent by semi-formal, but technically illegal, tribal primaries. Political observers have noted that Kuwaiti tribes have a strong tendency to cooperate and cohere internally to improve the electoral chances of those candidates who tribal leaders believe can best advance the parochial interests of the tribal group. As repeatedly occurred during the May 2008 national elections, tribes assembled in informal primaries to vote on a particular candidate -- almost invariably a family member and fellow tribesman -- believed best suited to represent the interests

of the tribe in parliament. These primaries, or 'fari'eyat, are illegal and, given their clear goal of bolstering tribal representation in parliament at the expense of those backed by the ruling family and/or the traditional urban elite, are now vigorously opposed by the GOK. GOK attempts to squelch these primaries in the 2008 elections were met, however, with equally vigorous resistance. On several occasions, rioting tribesmen hurled rocks, sticks and bottles at law enforcement squads who were attempting to shut down the fari'eyat. In the end, the tribes had their way: no tribal primaries were overturned, and no organizers prosecuted.

Kuwaiti Tribes as Voting Blocs

¶9. (C) In a country whose sense of nationhood remains undefined, many Kuwaitis look to families or tribal leaders to meet their political aspirations -- whether in providing basic social services, coercing the GOK to take action on their behalf on a particular issue, or blocking perceived GOK favoritism for the Hadhar (who, of course, look out for their own interests). In recent years, high tribal birthrates have brought a politically significant demographic shift. The number of tribal voters, who generally vote strictly along tribal lines, has grown to comprise more than half of the Kuwaiti electorate. One result of this transformation is the fact that two of the five constituencies in the Kuwaiti electoral system are currently represented solely by tribal-affiliated MPs. By way of historical comparison, British colonial statistics placed the population of Kuwait's territory a century ago at 50,000, of whom only about 13,000 were Bedouin tribesmen.

GOK Vote-buying Strategy Goes Awry

¶10. (C) Although the GOK's vote buying strategy worked in the past, when the tribal candidates functioned as mere "service deputies" elected to improve services for their constituents, more recent elections, culminating in the parliamentary election of 2008, proved the strategy to be no longer valid. Tribal MPs -- those the GOK had counted on to keep their tribes in line and remain loyal/grateful to the ruling family and its government appointees -- were instead elected to parliament by their constituents with a mandate to voice opposition to the government, a body which the Islamist leaning tribes tend to view as either egregiously secular/liberal or tainted by corruption.

¶11. (C) In 2008, in an attempt to placate tribalists and keep tabs on them, the PM (with Amiri backing) stacked the cabinet with members from the four largest tribes. This move backfired, however, as those cabinet members proved incapable of defining and enforcing the government's agenda. The actions of the tribalist MPs since the 2008 election, such as adopting a platform seeking forgiveness of consumer debt, increasingly demonstrate their conviction that they have their constituents' backing to pursue tribal-driven agendas

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and, at the same time, demonstrate that the MPs realize that their own political longevity depends on their ability to satisfy their constituents' often parochial interests. In this environment, tensions between tribalists and the GOK are running high; another Amiri dissolution of parliament will likely result in the near future.

Tribalism and Women

¶12. (C) With women having been granted full political rights in 2005, the 2008 elections provided Kuwait with its second experience of female participation in national elections. Tribal members, whose world view tends toward conservative Islam, initially opposed the right of women to vote or otherwise participate in political life. Once Kuwaiti women

finally got the vote, however, tribal organizers were quick to exploit it, as the men mobilized their wives and female kinsmen en masse in support of tribal candidates. Though electoral analysts believe that some tribal women voted according to their own independent preferences, it is regarded as axiomatic in Kuwait that the vast majority of them in 2006 and 2008 followed the electoral dictates of their fathers, husbands or brothers, and will likely do so again in future elections.

Tribal Links Still Transcend Borders

¶13. (C) In a recent meeting with poloff, Planning and Future Exploration Sector Assistant Under Secretary Hamad Munawer al-Musaylem used his own al-Rasheed tribe (of which Musaylem is a clan) to illustrate how tribalism in Kuwait still transcends national borders, and how tribal fealty trumps national patriotism. According to Musaylem, the approximately 40,000 Kuwaiti Rasha'id originally hail from the Nejd region of central Arabia -- as do 15,000 Rasha'id in Libya, 500,000 still in Saudi Arabia, and 1 million in Sudan. (Note: The al-Rasheed tribe rivaled the al-Saud for control of central Arabia for centuries until final defeat at the hands of Ibn Saud and his Ikhwan army after World War I. End note).

¶14. (C) As Musaylem explains it, in the "Rasheed Nation," the distant cousins in Sudan are the most economically underprivileged. These fellow "citizens," despite their large numbers, are disenfranchised and face persecution from a Sudanese government that regards them as political dissidents. According to Musaylem, each Kuwaiti Rasheedi contributes KD 3 (about USD 10.50) per month to aid these beleaguered tribal kinsmen. The collection and delivery mechanisms of this \$400,000/month contribution are unknown. (Comment: Such a recurring transfer of funds to fellow tribesmen abroad raises potential money laundering/terror finance concerns, but is difficult to assess. As Musaylem tells the story, this cash flow does not receive scrutiny from GOK officials. End comment.) When questioned on how his Libyan relatives fare at the hands of the regime, Musaylem explained that the mother of Qaddafi son (and heir apparent) Saif al-Islam is a Rasheedi, and uses her position to assure fair treatment for the whole clan in Libya. Similar cross-border linkages connect all Kuwaiti tribes to expatriate fellow tribal "citizens" across the Middle East and North Africa.

"Give Us Our Oil"

¶15. (C) Further highlighting the disparity of tribal versus national interests is the recent demand made by one of the al-Ajmi MPs that the GOK turn over government-owned oil rights on "tribal land" directly to the tribes. Such a demand flies in the face of the traditional view that the land of Kuwait, and the wealth that flows from it, is administered by the hereditary ruling family for the benefit of all. Similarly, insistent calls in recent years for the GOK to "forgive" (i.e. pay) the private consumer debt of Kuwaiti citizens come primarily from tribal MPs, and constitute a populist rallying cry within the tribes. Such demands reflect the widespread tribal perception that they have been historically shortchanged by the stingy Al Sabah and deserve a much larger slice of the national pie.

Kuwait's Tribal Conundrum

¶16. (C) The conundrum that faces the GOK and Kuwaiti society

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is this: Because the Bedouin tribalists who became citizens decades ago never fully assimilated and (the other side of the same coin) were never fully embraced by the Hadhar as

citizens on an equal footing, they remain on a lower tier of the Kuwait social hierarchy. Accordingly, the children and grandchildren of the original Bedouin Kuwaitis enjoy economic and social opportunities at a level lower than their Hadhar counterparts -- even though the major tribes are well represented at all levels of government bureaucracy. On a personal level, the primary means of securing lucrative government positions is "wasta" -- personal connection -- and the bedu have less of it than the Hadhar. The private sector is even more firmly dominated by old-guard commercial urbanites or highly skilled expatriate labor. A glass ceiling thus blocks the progress of a tribalist aspiring to leadership on most career paths, with the primary exception being the Kuwaiti Parliament. For Kuwait's tribes, seats in the National Assembly have become an effective means of exerting leverage against the Hadhar in order to advance their socioeconomic interests.

¶17. (C) An important additional point of concern is the manifest tendency for Kuwaiti tribalists -- particularly those who have coalesced into the opposition bloc that flexed its political muscles so conspicuously in the 2008 national election -- to have a socially conservative and Islamist world view. While thousands of Kuwaitis have had sustained interaction with Westerners since the discovery of oil, and thousands more have been educated in the United States, United Kingdom and other Western countries, the tribals have been less affected by such influences than have the descendants of Hadhar families. This is widely thought to be because fewer descendants of the bedu have studied in the West. It may also reflect some residual proclivity from the days, early in the last century, when the tribes of Kuwait provided warriors for the bloody, peninsula-wide "jihad" conducted by Ibn Saud's fanatical Ikhwan militia. Investigating possible correlations between violent extremist elements in Kuwait and certain tribes or intra-tribal groups, while difficult, could yield insight regarding sources of extremism in the country.

Comment

¶18. (C) National identity, and the sense of unity that goes with it, remain nebulous concepts in Kuwait; and in recent years this state of affairs has been exacerbated with the passing of each successive short-lived government -- five since 2006. While many Kuwaitis thus continue to struggle with the notion of what it means to be a Kuwaiti, tribalists have no such doubts about their core identity or their immediate interests. With increasing success, tribal groups are using their numbers to form a loose nexus of government opposition and, in all likelihood, will continue to leverage their growing numbers so as to compel the GOK into addressing their parochial interests. There are few indications that the government or any of its supporters has any idea how to stem this rising tide of tribal assertiveness or build a countervailing parliamentary majority on a non-tribal basis. Consequently, as the old status quo that kept bedu under firm Hadhar control fades into memory, the Al Sabah may be increasingly hard-pressed to sustain their traditional place at the head of all the disparate members of the increasingly estranged Kuwaiti "family". End comment.

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